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The Bluebird of Love

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I once heard Charles Bukowski say that it was his father who had taught him the meaning of pain without end. As a child, at his suburban Los Angeles home, Bukowski's father would make him mow the lawn, first this way then that, and finally finish off with nail scissors. If one hair of grass were out of place, the boy of six would be ushered into the enclosed corridor bathroom, where barely two feet separated the tub from the facing wall. His father would take the razor strop and, forcing Hank to lower his pants and shorts or bare his back, whip him in a frenzied rage, methodically, stroke after stroke, while the small boy cried out in agony. As an old man, Bukowski never recalled how many lashes his father administered each time—12, 15 or more. All he knew was that the beatings were regular events over a period of more than 6 years. Once the young boy fainted with shock. He fell face first into the toilet bowl, grazing his already disfigured face, which was pockmarked by severe acne. Bukowski once wrote of a bluebird that sang within his heart, that accompanied him all his life long. The music of birds (real and imaginary) and classical composers gave him strength over many years of rejection, spurned manuscripts, tragic love affairs, soul-destroying jobs, alcoholic bouts and

lack of love. Without alcohol, classical music, and later the racetrack, Bukowski could not write. He needed music in his life because it was beautiful to him. So little else was. Alcohol and the races gave him escape from the pain and loneliness, the misunderstandings his life and sufferings engendered.

Once Bukowski sat for a film crew and began to read a poem he had written about Jane, one of his great loves. He mentioned her legs—those beautiful silky legs that seemed to stretch an eternity before disappearing under her skirt. Just to speak of them reduced him to tears, sobbing like a baby and apologizing profusely—"I read you the wrong story, I'm sorry, I can't... It was the wrong story." He took another slug of beer, one more waiting in the well. In another shot Bukowski is waiting for his young girlfriend to appear. Cupcakes was mad at him, had gone off somewhere, and he never knew when she would come back. He just had to believe that she would. As the camera rolled, with every sound of a car in the parking lot outside, he moved swiftly and anxiously, oblivious to the film, to the curtained window, mumbling, "Maybe it's her? Maybe it's Cupcakes?" He seemed lost and lonely without her—a man adrift at sea with no hope but her company as his salvation. For all the pose of a man able to take it all, a "fine duker," he lived each day in excruciating pain, in loneliness and lack of love, in need of a compassion and tenderness he would never know until it was too late. Yet the very pain which had cut him so adrift had created defenses and survival mechanisms

so profound that every time some one came close to him, he would seek to destroy the bond that held them. He would test the very fabric of everything that drew them near, be the opposite of all the creativity and tenderness they knew lay cowed and withering, alongside the bluebird, in his heart. Charles Bukowski wept easily and unashamedly. He loved and cared for his daughter—and he loved music, small magazines, dark bars, fighting, and the sound of a refrigerator door.

Bukowski once encouraged a friend of mine to drink until he had alcohol poisoning. His last memory of Bukowski was calling an ambulance—the phone in one hand, bottle of red in the other, taking a swig between questions from the operator. The friend, a professor, lay prone in a pool of his own vomit, had shat himself and was crying. Bukowski just looked on and asked "Did you really want to know what life created those poems? Was it worth it? All the Assholes in the World and Mine?" He was enraged. Everything had been said. They never spoke again.

In his lonely days of flophouses, anonymous condos, and motel dives, of being an unknown drunk—those nearly fifteen years of sorting mail in a suburban Los Angeles Post Office, Bukowski would return home, alone or in the arms of any woman who would take him, to cradle the unbearable pain of his life. The visions and clattering of the typewriter flowed as easily as the rotgut red and the endless longnecks through his hands. He listened to classical music all day long from a cheap

transistor. At first a poet, his words were pressed from him with all the urgency of juice from a crushed black grape. They were the outpourings of a man who believed in love, who entered a bar circumspectly, resigned and understated. He was a shy and tender man made combative by fear and the surge of daring and self-assertion the alcohol gave to his persona. The words spilled on the paper and left a stain on all those who read them. One was never the same again—forever tainted, altered, by the memory of those hours or minutes spent reading his transpositions of the bluebird's song.

In the early days of his courtship with June, back in the early summer of 1923, Henry Miller received a bonus from Western Union, some $300 in cash. Deeply in debt to friends and employees, he decided that he would host a sumptuous meal for his benefactors and pay back his debts. This he did, which left him as broke as ever. Many of his friends did not appreciate each other. After having sung a few songs and given an improvised speech to great acclaim, Miller had decided to slip away unnoticed and began the trek along Broadway, through the huge crowds at 42nd Street, and on to Wilson's dance hall. Along the way he saw the bright lights advertising a gala performance by Tom Burke (the 'Lancashire Caruso') from the Covent Garden Opera Company. At that moment he had the thought for the

first time that he would love to see London and Europe one day with June.

June was working that night. When he entered she was dancing in the arms of one of her admirers. Henry must be careful not to make him jealous, she explained. He had been good to her and liked to pretend they were in love. As if to reassure Henry she took the rose she was wearing (given by her suitor, Marder) and fed it into his buttonhole. What should one think of a girl who gives one man another man's flowers? Miller felt sorry for Marder at that moment—he had never known jealousy, and the only woman he had truly loved until now (Cora Seward) he had walked away from of his own accord. Henry had begun to realize that June was a great fabulator—her stories didn't add up. A brief conversation with her suitor reinforced the idea. She was, he claimed, just out for a good time—one couldn't believe a word she said. The next night June stood Henry up at the Palace and he went in to see Vaudeville acts, and then to hear Burke sing his current sensation, *Roses of Picardy.* A Negro he gave his spare ticket to on the spur of the moment accompanied him. The song Burke sang that night was about "the one rose that does not die," which one keeps in one's heart. Miller thought back to the rose that June had given him the night before. The words suddenly took on a terrible and terrifying significance. Henry was transfixed with fear and jealousy—he became terrified that he might lose June and had a dreadful premonition that

he *would* eventually lose her, simply because he loved her so much, just like Cora Seward.

Henry Miller, like Charles Bukowski, subconsciously associated love with loss—everyone he had loved he had lost. Oblivious to the enraptured applause of the crowd, who began to strew the stage with roses, Miller fled across the street and bounded up the steps to the dance hall. June seemed perplexed at his agitation and jealousy. She fended off his insistent questions with implausible sounding excuses. Miller found himself for the first time face to face with some undeniable truths about June—that she had been lying and distorting the truth out of necessity for so long that untruth came naturally to her. She had an extended circle of admirers who were under her spell; June lived in a world of self-inflicted chaos where nothing was really certain, everything was intangible and fluid, and no one, not even her, was in control of her life. June came to Henry at a time when he was at a nadir, when all hope seemed lost. She seemed like a beacon of light, but he must have sensed the danger implicit in her character. He blinded himself to it because his need of her was so great.

Henry Miller had deep flaws. He was incapable of loving a woman selflessly—love was connected in his mind with needs: his needs. He maintained, deep in his psyche, an unspoken belief that the man must dominate the woman, that she must sublimate her needs to his. This derived from reaction to the trauma caused by his parents' relationship and his father's

apparent failings. Similarly, he was torn between idealized love of a woman and the fear (of loss and the feminine) that love inspired in him, which could easily turn to hate as it had done earlier with his mother and his first wife, Beatrice Wickens. From this night on, Henry Miller's relationship with June would never be devoid of fear and jealousy on his part. June must have been aware that Henry, like all the other men in her life, was susceptible to manipulation.

It is one of the great paradoxes of humanity that creation is linked so closely to pain and destruction. Both Bukowski and Miller knew that. Suffering and cruelty (as Artaud recognized) are fundamental, at some level to almost every human act. The ability of men and women, often the most innocuous-seeming and socially normal, to inflict intense cruelty and suffering on others is so commonplace as to be banal. Those who profess to love us are usually the most able and the most willing to hurt us, to cause damage beyond repair. Hannah Arendt's banality of evil is something many of us witness every day in our own homes. The most afraid I have ever been, a man twice held up at gunpoint without flinching, has been at the hands of a diminutive middle class girl in a pink maternity dress. In her lies lay the death of my future and all my dreams. No one can comprehend the depth of cruelty inflicted (unrecorded and thus unrecognized) in private, the seeds of man's deepest despair.

Write what you like, someone once told me, but everything in life must be substantiated. If that was true then God and art would have no meaning, because it is the very fact they cannot be substantiated that is their expression of the divine. Because, like Bukowski, I had no tangible proof, the crimes against me dissolved into thin air. The proof was obvious for me to see—in it lay the foundation and fabric of my art. Truth and justice are strangers, who only encounter one another rarely in passing. Money and power are gods. Faith and compassion, and thus hope and charity are, in the world I have witnessed, in shreds. God lurks in the shadows, a little afraid and trembling, singing like a bluebird in the heart of those who take heed.

Like Bukowski, I carry a bluebird in my heart. His had no name, but mine is the Stellar Jay who used to wake me in the early morning beneath the giant sequoias of Big Sur. My bluebird left me feathers which I posted to the woman I loved. From them and from clover and ferns I sent, she made deep blue photomontages as a gift for me upon my return. We inspired each other for a time. She was so very far away, but each night I fell to sleep after hearing her voice. Each night as she slept I would write her stories, to the sound of the waves and distant seals across the dense Pacific fog. Then I would fall asleep caressing my cock and imagine coming on her satin quim.

Every day she would awake to creation and a sign of

love. Once she said "Surprise me!" That morning I walked the Coast Highway and picked fresh lemons from the trees at Nepenthe, which I mailed across America for her to crush in her tea. I still recall the scent of lemon on her fingers when I kissed them and the taste of oysters in her cunt. I remember the way she took my arm and walked so proudly that Sunday we went to church after making love for the first time. I recall the way she sighed when I touched her sex, the way she whispered "fuck me" in the dark, and how I loved to fall asleep in her arms. When I think of her legs, my tongue buried in her ass, I too could cry, sit and weep like a child.

I never believed somehow that I would discover the meaning of pain without end. But I did. It came to me the day my daughter died to me. The last time I saw her, her blue eyes shone like sapphire stars. In her eyes I saw the work and creativity of a lifetime, though she was at most five months old. She looked at me and smiled and I felt my heart break asunder, unleashing wave upon wave of love without end. Everything I ever wrote was born in her glance. When one loses a child one spends one's life in the company of ghosts. Every child in the street or in the park becomes a reminder of the love one has lost, of the joys one will never know. I always listen to children with rapt attention. Once in a suburb of Paris, at a party for artists, I met a small girl named Lola, who was sad and bored by the company, largely

ignored and confined to a corner. I spoke to her and we spent the evening together, talking and learning from each other. When her mother finally left, one painter turned to me and said, "It's so nice to see a father be so very close to his daughter, even when the parents are separated." "I don't know her," I replied. No one would believe she was not my child. Even if I only knew her for a day, I at least wanted her to know that to me she could never be invisible, that she would always be heard, and for an hour or two at least, the center of my world. In her voice I heard the echo of a much-loved stranger, a ghost whom I longed to hold in my arms.

At certain points in life the pain of betrayal, loss or absence becomes so deep that one usually has no alternative except to share it, to inflict it anew in turn, or to use it as a catalyst for creation. If ever the pen stalls in my hand, I have only to recall certain events in my past for the ink and the tears to flow anew. I have been in love, since forever, with that dream of Jean Cocteau, who saw in his night visions three rings of Saturn made of white, pink and yellow gold—signifying the three stages of ideal marriage—friendship, love and faithfulness. It remains my ideal. The possibility of finding it keeps my heart alive. Only one woman I ever knew was worthy of it, but at the time I knew her, I was not. That may be my enduring tragedy, the seed of my undoing. Yet I can never lose my faith in love, because God is love and to lose my faith in love is to lose everything there ever was, or will be. Creation is an act of love. For each stroke of the pen, each tap on the keyboard, I imagine

an act of beauty—a caress, a smile, a tender glance. For each word written I feel a surge of hope and a renewed belief in the potentiality of man. The voice speaks through me, my mind all blank. I simply take dictation of the sentences that form around me in the night.

Making love to a beautiful woman, a woman whose beauty lies within and loves us, is the closest I suppose we will ever come to knowing joy. To me the cry of a woman weeping is the most heart-rending sound I know. The sight most likely to move me is that of a woman in distress—the heartbreaking sight of her soiled underwear, the fact she is embarrassed at me going down on her because her cooter stinks, or unable to buy a drink because she is too poor. The internal music of each woman is unique. One senses it in her walk and gestures, the movement of her hands. Next to my heart I have a tattoo copied from an ancient Scythian shield. It shows two tigers, circling one another, about to engage in an act of love. I put it there to echo the music I heard in the mountains above St. Gervais, among the fields of blue Gentians and freshly mown hay. Captured in their static movements are the strength and power, the tenderness and love, the passion and despair of a year of my life. Their silence, only broken by the occasional sound of my bluebird, is more eloquent than words, as are the deep scars upon my back.

— Karl Orend
Meudon

The Bluebird of Love
by
Karl Orend
was published
by
Alyscamps Press in Paris, France,
on June first 2019 in a limited edition
of twenty numbered copies,
hors commerce, signed by the author.

This is copy_____.